

Kentucky and the Colonial Frontiersman

Emily Bens

Kentucky became the first western frontier, an example of the colonists' struggle for the pursuit of happiness. It produced a new type of American, the pioneer, who fueled the drive westward to the Pacific. The Long Hunters were the forerunners of cowboys, fighting Indians and roaming the wilderness alone. But they had families at home that they wanted to bring into the wilderness to build homes. The dream of most colonists was just that, to farm and own land. The quest to own land, better or cheaper land, would drive the pioneer ever westward.

Kentucky was basically uninhabited, unlike Ohio and southern Tennessee. It was full of game, including buffalo, and home of the famed Bluegrass. Kentucky was claimed by England, France, the Cherokee, the Shawnee, and the Iroquois. Indians had long fought battles over Kentucky, a sacred hunting ground. The Cherokee claimed their ancestors' bones were piled beneath the soil. Land had been cleared to attract the buffalo that covered the Great Plains and now roamed in great herds(Cotterill 19). Kentucky was obviously valuable and precious, but also conspicuously unprotected by Indians, French or English. Only the natural border of the Appalachian and Allegheny Mountains stood between the colonists and Kentucky.

The Treaty of Paris in 1763 ceded all French holdings in North America to England(Rice 16). Colonists believed this would make lands west of the Appalachians available for settlement. Many soldiers were promised land in payment for their service in the French and Indian Wars and wanted that land to be in the west. However, the Proclamation of 1763 forbade settlement west of the Appalachian Mountains. This proclamation was the first in a series of acts the colonists protested(Newman 63). Pressure from potential settlers and speculators led to the Treaty of Hard Labor on

October 17, 1768 near Hard Labor Creek. In this treaty, the Cherokee gave up land between the Appalachian Mountains, the Ohio River and the Kanawha River, a tributary of the Ohio. Similarly, in the Treaty of Fort Stanwix on November 5, 1768, the Iroquois established the Ohio River as their southernmost boundary(Rice 30).

Colonists were still dissatisfied with these small concessions. The Treaty of Lochaber on October 17, 1770 established a line from the mouth of the Kanawha River to Long Island in Holston River. The surveyors of the line, led by John Donelson, were more ambitious. "Faulty instruments" led them on a northwesterly course from Long Island and they ended up at the Kentucky River further west of the Kanawha. Donelson mistook it for the Levisa Fork of the big Sandy River, further east, and persuaded the Cherokee to accept the new line(Rice 34). In December of 1771, the Earl of Dunmore became the new governor of Virginia. He organized Kentucky and surrounding lands into Fincastle County in 1772(Rice 47).

Early explorers and hunters had expounded on the great attributes of Kentucky, entrancing pioneers and speculators alike. These first explorers inspired only a few hunters to venture into the contested territory during the political haggling over its borders. These treaties meant little to colonists or Indians, as neither really obeyed them. These men became known as "Long Hunters", men who would disappear for months or years to hunt game and furs. "Clothed in coonskin or otter caps, buckskin moccasins and leggings, and long hunting shirts of soft leather and equipped with hatchets and hunting knives", they ranged over great distances while hunting. They returned periodically to station camps to drop off furs or get supplies(Rice 20). While settlement in Kentucky was

forbidden by the English and Indians, the Long Hunters ruled, escaping Indians and roaming the country.

The most famous of these Long Hunters is Daniel Boone. Boone first set out for Kentucky on May 1, 1769 with John Finley, John Stewart, Joseph Holden, James Monay, and William Cool(Boone). On June 7, the party reached the Red River and “from the top of an eminence, saw with pleasure the beautiful level of Kentucky”(Boone). They hunted successfully, but on December 22, Boone and Stewart were taken captive by Indians. The Indians stole all they had and released Boone and Stewart. Boone and Stewart turned to follow their captors and succeeded in retrieving five horses. The Indians quickly caught Boone and Stewart and held them captive for seven days, after which Boone and Stewart escaped(Cotterill, 52). They returned to camp to find it deserted, the others had decided to return home after Boone and Stewart had gone missing. Boone and Stewart overtook their company, who had been joined by Squire Boone and Alexander Neely. Stewart, the Boones and Neely decided to stay and hunt(Cotterill 53). Both Stewart and Boone had lost all the furs that had hunted, and Neely and Squire Boone were newly arrived. However, Boone and Stewart clashed with Indians again and only Boone escaped, while Neely returned home(Boone).

Unperturbed, Boone and his brother continued hunting until they began to run low on ammunition. Squire Boone returned to “settlement” for ammunition on May 1, 1770, while Daniel Boone remained in the wilderness(Cotterill 53).

“A few days I passed uncomfortably. . . A thousand dreadful apprehensions presented themselves to my view. . . One day I undertook a tour through the country, and the diversity and beauties of nature I met with in this charming season, expelled every gloomy and vexatious thought. . . No populous city, with all varieties of commerce and stately structures, could afford so much pleasure to my mind, as the beauties of nature I found here. Thus, through an uninterrupted scene of sylvan pleasures, I spent the time until the 27th day of July. . .”(Boone)

Kasper Mansker, also a Long Hunter, came upon Boone, alone, in the middle of Kentucky, singing so loudly and off key that Mansker thought he was an Indian decoy(Rice 27). Daniel Boone met up with his brother and continued to hunt and explore until March of 1771, when they returned home. At Cumberland Gap, Cherokees took their guns, horses and pelts(Rice 28). Boone returned home none the richer after more than two years absence. Boone left a wife and several children to fend for themselves during that time.

In 1773, Boone sold his farm on the Yadkin and prepared to move his family to Kentucky. He left with five other families on September 25. On October 10, “the rear of our company was attacked by a number of Indians, who killed six, and wounded one man. Of these my eldest son was one that fell in action”(Boone). James Boone, his son, was shot through the hip and tortured until he died(Rice 60). The company turned back. Boone and his family returned to the nearest settlement, now homeless. In June, 1774, Boone again left his family, sent by Governor Dunmore of Virginia to warn surveyors near the Falls of the Ohio of impending Indian attacks. He and Michael Stoner completed the trip of eight hundred miles in sixty-two days(Boone).

On March 19, 1775 Judge Henderson, a member of the Transylvania Company, and Cherokee chiefs signed a treaty in which the Cherokee sold the territory between the

Kentucky River and the highlands south of the Cumberland River for 10,000 pounds worth of trading goods. That same day, he contracted Daniel Boone to lead a group of men into the territory and begin to settle it(Rice 73). He began to erect Fort Boonesborough with his party of about 30 men on April 1,1775. Before the conclusion of the treaty, Dragging Canoe, a Cherokee chief, warned Henderson that Kentucky would become “a dark and bloody ground”(Rice 74). Another Cherokee told Boone, “Brother, we have given you a fine land, but I believe you will have much trouble in settling it”(Boone). Boone and his party were attacked twice before reaching the site of Boonesborough, during which four men were killed and five wounded. Another man was killed as Fort Boonesborough was being erected.

On June 14, Boone returned for his family and brought them to Fort Boonesborough, where Rebecca and Jemima Boone were the only women(Boone). Settlers of Harrodstown, St. Asaph’s, and Boiling Springs did not accept Henderson’s and the Transylvania Company’s claim over them and Kentucky, having defied royal decree and Indian threat to settle in Kentucky. But the arrival of thirty North Carolinians laying claim to land near Harrodstown, provoked Henderson to invite representatives to Boonesborough to decide on a system of government that the other settlements could accept(Rice 77). Eighteen delegates came to Boonesborough on May 23, 1775 and stayed until May 27. They set down nine laws concerning courts, militia, punishing criminals, preventing profanity and Sabbath breaking, writs of attachment, clerk’s and sheriff’s fees, preserving the range and game, and improving the breed of horses(Cotterill 92).

“My footsteps have often been marked with blood, and therefore I can truly subscribe to its original name. Two darling sons, and a brother, have I lost by savage hands, which have also taken from me forty valuable horses, and abundance of cattle. . . But now the scene is change: peace crowns the sylvan shade.”(Boone)

Daniel Boone is the most renowned settler of Kentucky, but he was not alone.

Many others braved the Indians and the elements to lay claim to the bounties of Kentucky. While other colonists were fighting for their right to representation, settlers of Kentucky were battling for their right to make a living and a home for themselves.

Although many sought only wealth, some also recognized the beauty of untouched wilderness and saw the damage human greed and disregard could wreak on it. The quest for the riches of the earth, whether for spiritual or material gain, would lead many explorers and pioneers past the line of civilization. It would be the formation of a country built on the idea of the self made man, the belief that you could have and be more than your ancestors. The foundation of a country filled with opportunity.

Bibliography

Boone, Daniel. "The Adventures of Colonial Daniel Boon, Formerly a Hunter; Containing a Narrative of the Wars of Kentucky". John Filson: 1784.

Cotterill, R.S. History of Pioneer Kentucky. Cincinnati: Johnson and Hardin, 1917.

Newman, John and Schmalbach, John. United States History. New York: Amsco School Publications, Inc., 2002.

Rice, Otis. Frontier Kentucky. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975.